

SOME SOURCES OF READING PROBLEMS FOR FOREIGN-LANGUAGE LEARNERS¹

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According to Kenneth Goodman (1967), reading is a psycholinguistic process in which the reader, guided by the knowledge of the language being read, reconstructs an encoded message by selecting syntactic and semantic cues as he proceeds. To read in a foreign language, we use basically the same method, even though native language interference and unfamiliarity with the code make the process much more complex. Foreign students consider vocabulary their most serious handicap in reading English; because of the nature of the reading process, words are the smallest physical meaningful units of the message and they play a more important role and constitute more of a problem than we are sometimes willing to concede. Current pedagogical approaches to dealing with this problem could be modified with a more accurate understanding of the reading process. Several specific suggestions are made.

Linguists, psychologists, and educators have long been concerned with the nature of the reading process and the ways of effectively teaching and acquiring reading skill. The advent of generative transformational grammar, which distinguishes between a surface level of language and a deep or underlying semantic and syntactic structure, has not only provided new insights into the nature of language, but has also opened new channels of investigation in language teaching methodology.

One of the most interesting studies on the nature of reading was conducted by Kenneth Goodman (1967) who considers reading a psycholinguistic "guessing" process. Although most of Goodman's work deals with the acquisition of reading by native speakers of English, mainly children, I believe that many of his discoveries are relevant to the problems of reading in a foreign language. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of those problems and suggest possible ways of dealing with them.

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Using Goodman's (1967) basic assumptions on the nature of the reading process as a point of reference, a questionnaire was designed which aimed at acquiring information from adult second-language learners themselves. This questionnaire was distributed to thirty students at the English Language Institute (ELI), all native speakers of Spanish. The results provided some data concerning the methods the students use, or think they use, to read English, the problems they think they have, and the degree of difficulty they find in the different kinds of material they have to read. These questionnaire results will be reported and discussed below in conjunction with a general analysis of the problem of reading in a foreign language.

Before beginning such an analysis, however, it should be noted that the questionnaire, and consequently the discussion here, is limited in its applications, to second-language learners with the following characteristics: (1) the native language of the students is Spanish, a language that uses essentially the same alphabet as English; (2) they are all literate and are relatively proficient in reading in their native language; (3) their main purpose in reading is to acquire an adequate comprehension of the material.

In Goodman's view, reading is a selective process in which the reader, guided by his knowledge of his native language, picks up graphic cues and relates them to syntactic, semantic, and phonological cues; these choices are then decoded and stored in short term memory, to be subsequently tested and associated with future decoded choices. Reading, then, involves the following factors: (1) knowledge of the language (the code); (2) ability to predict or guess in order to make the correct choices; (3) ability to remember the previous cues; (4) ability to make the necessary associations between the different cues that have been selected.

When reading in a foreign language, these factors are somehow modified and new elements appear: (1) the reader's knowledge of the foreign language is not like that of the native speaker; (2) the guessing or predicting ability necessary to pick up the correct cues is hindered by the imperfect knowledge of the language; (3) the wrong choice of cues or the uncertainty of the choice makes associations more difficult; (4) due to unfamiliarity with the material and the lack of training, the memory span in a foreign language in the early stages of its acquisition is usually shorter than in our native language; recollection of previous cues then, is more difficult in a foreign than in the mother tongue; (5) at all levels, and at all times, there is interference of the native language.

Let us now consider each one of these factors in more detail. In the first place, we should say that the knowledge of the language

depends largely on the degree of proficiency of the reader. An adult reader very seldom or never has any difficulty with the grammatical structures of his own language, particularly at the recognition level. In this respect, the main difficulty of the native reader is vocabulary, since there may be words that he does not know, simply because he has never encountered them, or because he has forgotten them. Lexical items are not acquired as part of the system of the language in the same way that grammatical structures are. The acquisition of vocabulary depends very much on the education and to a certain extent on the degree of sophistication and the personal experiences of the speaker. At any rate, it is a very gradual process and, we could even venture, a never-ending one, since no speaker knows all the items in the lexicon of his language. On the other hand, most native speakers learn rather quickly all the possible grammatical structures in the system of their language, at least at the recognition level, and at a given time in the natural development of their acquisition of the language.

With the foreign speaker, the situation is similar. Depending on his degree of proficiency, he will at least recognize a certain number of grammatical structures. Eventually, it will be possible for him, due to the systematic nature of language, to master grammatical structures almost in the same way that a native speaker does. The situation is by no means identical, but it shares some essential features. His acquisition of vocabulary may, however, be a more difficult process, because of differences in the nature of the lexical and grammatical systems. This is the reason why it is always necessary to teach vocabulary in meaningful situations or in relation to other words grammatically or semantically related to them. Furthermore, phonological interference from the native language may pose vocabulary-learning problems.

The results of the questionnaire previously described handed out to the ELI students show that students think that vocabulary constitutes their main problem. In a scale of difficulty from 0 (no difficulty) to 5 (maximum degree of difficulty), the mean response for vocabulary—the highest of all—was 3.23, while grammatical difficulties averaged only 2.19.³ As we will see, there are other reasons for this result, but the place of vocabulary among the difficulties in foreign language reading should not be underestimated.

³In a more recent survey among a different group of students at the ELI, including 41 speakers of such diverse languages as Vietnamese, Persian, Italian, Finnish and others, the results were astonishingly similar. Again, the highest average was for vocabulary (3.36), while grammar averaged only 1.29.

Let us now take the second factor on our list, that is the ability to predict or select tentatively the cues necessary for the comprehension of the material. As Goodman says:

At any point in time, of course, the reader has available to him and brings to his reading the sum total of his experience and his language thought and development. This self-evident fact needs to be stated because what appears to be intuitive in any guessing is actually the result of knowledge so well learned that the process of its application requires little conscious effort; most language use has reached this automatic, intuitive level. (1967:130)

In a foreign language the situation is more complex. In the first place, language use has *not* reached this "automatic, intuitive level." It is, depending on the level of proficiency, a conscious process, full of doubt and interference. The anticipatory process which, according to Goodman, constitutes such an important part in the process of reading is then hindered by the fact that the foreign-language reader has not yet reached the level at which choices are made automatically and intuitively.

I have already noted that it is difficult for a foreign speaker to associate reading cues. Two reasons were suggested: (1) the uncertainty of the correctness of the choice made; and (2) more obvious, the impossibility of association if the choice is wrong. This part of the "psycholinguistic game" of reading is similar for both native and foreign readers since reading cues are constantly tested for semantic and grammatical acceptability in the context developed by prior choices and decoding.

At this point the foreign reader is at a disadvantage though; rather than recalling cues that he is familiar with (his native words and their meanings), he is forced to recall cues that he knows imperfectly or not at all. Because of this he will forget those cues much faster than he would cues in his native language. At any given point of the reading process, the reader is both predicting future cues and making associations with the past cues that he has stored in his memory. The native speaker does this unconsciously; for the foreign reader, this is a slow and difficult process. The prediction of future cues is restricted by his imperfect knowledge of the language; moreover, because he has to recall unfamiliar cues, his memory span is very short; he therefore easily forgets the cues that he has already stored. These two factors make associations insecure, slow, and difficult.

In the ELI questionnaire already mentioned, the students attributed second degree of difficulty (mean = 2.53) to the fact that although they seem to understand what they are reading, they very

easily “lose the thread.”⁴ The problem is that while reading, they have to concentrate on a triple process, as illustrated in Figure 1.

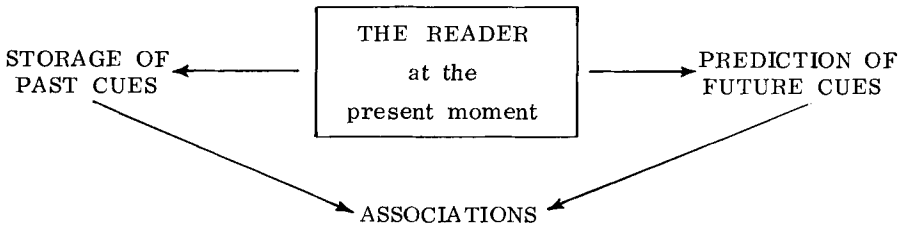


Figure 1. Schematic representation of three processes involved in reading.

If they try to predict what is coming, they forget the past cues; if they try to concentrate on the past cues, prediction is impaired.

The last problem that we mentioned is interference of the native language. This is an omnipresent obstacle. We find syntactic, semantic, and phonological interference, not only in the reading process but also in the acquisition of other language skills: listening, speaking, and writing.

What is the nature of the native language interference in the reading process? Syntactic interference makes the “guessing game” more difficult; it has been noted that the imperfect knowledge of the language makes prediction difficult; we should now add that the effect of the syntactic structures of the reader’s native language contributes to this difficulty, since they tend to lead the reader into channels foreign to the syntax of the language being read. Semantic interference makes associations more difficult, since they may give wrong meanings or wrong shades of meaning to the cues selected and end up with false or distorted meaning, or no meaning at all. As far as the phonological interference is concerned, it seems that even when reading silently, we often form “phonetic images” of the printed signal. All of the students questioned at the ELI answered that when reading silently they stop when they come to a word they do not know how to pronounce. In the case of those people who can read in a foreign language but are unable to speak it or have never even heard it spoken, the interference does not exist since they automatically assign to the foreign language the phonology of their native language and the conflict never arises. There is, then, danger of phonetic interference

⁴This is also true of the second survey mentioned in footnote 3; the average in this case was 1.87.

even when the reading is done silently. Needless to say, when reading aloud, the interference is obviously greater. Reading aloud is extremely difficult, unless the material is well known to the reader. As Goodman puts it:

In oral reading, the reader must perform two tasks at the same time. He must produce an oral equivalent of the graphic input which is the *signal* in reading, and he must also reconstruct the meaning of what he is reading. (1967:131)

The reader must go from the surface structure (the printed form) to the deep structure to capture meaning (decoding process) and then, he must encode again to produce another form of surface structure (sound). A proficient reader does this simultaneously; for a foreign speaker the process is not that simple for two reasons: (1) there is native-language interference at all levels; (2) the process is not simultaneous, since he needs to decode the meaning first in order to produce the right pronunciation, intonation and stress and it has already been shown that the decoding operation for the foreign reader constitutes in itself a slow and difficult process.

At the beginning of this paper, the importance of vocabulary in reading in a foreign language was briefly considered. Why did students rate vocabulary as their greatest difficulty? In the first place, let us make it clear that to say that vocabulary constitutes one of the main obstacles for communication in a foreign language at a certain level of proficiency, does not mean that lexical items in general should be considered the most important or the only part of a language to be emphasized in the teaching situation. It simply means that once the basic patterns have been acquired and the student "feels" that he has begun to handle the "system" of the language, he realizes that he does not understand the meanings of the words in the patterns; he can often pick up syntactic cues, but new lexical items not only block his comprehension but also make him doubt the correctness of his syntactic choice.

It is at this point that the student begins to use a dictionary, initiating a new chain of problems. It is not my intention to discuss here the advantages or disadvantages of bilingual or/and monolingual dictionaries, but it may be interesting to analyze the results of the questionnaire in this respect. Eighty-three per cent of the students answered that they try to understand directly in English all the time; the rest said that they "sometimes" or always translate into Spanish. However, only 16% of the students said that they use a monolingual English dictionary exclusively. On the other hand,

90% of them admitted using a bilingual Spanish-English dictionary always or "sometimes."⁵ Although frequently inaccurate or misleading, the bilingual dictionary seems to give them the security of a concrete answer, while the monolingual dictionary often forces them to "guess" the meaning, adding more doubts to the already existing ones.

Right or wrong, it is a fact that the learner of a foreign language "holds on" to words. In reading, the cues he looks for and the cues he has stored in his memory *are* words, and it is obvious that he wants to be sure that he understands them. In reading, and we must remember that these people are already literate in their own language, he has been conditioned to see the word as the smallest physical unit, the printed symbol out of which meaning comes. This is not entirely true, of course, but it is not entirely wrong either, and since it is a deep-rooted conviction, a pre-conceived notion very difficult to change, it is better to take it into consideration than to discard it as wrong and ignore it completely.

Another important consideration concerns the material to be read. In the questionnaire the students were asked to indicate whether they found textbooks, fiction (novels or stories), magazines, and newspapers, either "easy" or "difficult." Being a non-native speaker of English myself, the result did not surprise me: the majority of the students considered fiction and textbooks easy (65% and 63% respectively) while only a minority considered newspapers and magazines easy (34% and 26% respectively).

Using Goodman's view of reading as a selective process, the result is easy to explain. The style of textbooks is didactic; the content, in consequence, is carefully graded and distributed. Cues are easy to detect and they are distributed in such a way that they are also easy to remember. Novels and short stories have a storyline to serve as guide for predicting future cues and recollecting past ones. These, of course, are broad generalizations; we all have had to study difficult textbooks and have struggled unsuccessfully through James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Journalistic style, as opposed to textbooks and fiction, is more concise. Cues are much closer to each other and there is no gradation. Besides, magazines tend to make use of current colloquialisms and jargon which make comprehension even more difficult.

As Goodman points out in his paper, reading is a complex process. I have tried to show that reading in a foreign language is even more complex, indicating some of the reasons for that com-

⁵A few students made contradictory responses in the questionnaire (always *or* sometimes) thus affecting reported percentages (16% + 90% = 106%).

plexity. With these considerations in mind, let us now suggest, in the way of a summary, some of the points to remember when teaching or selecting reading material.

(1) Being a complex skill, reading should be approached carefully and taught progressively.

(2) From the very beginning, overall comprehension should be emphasized and consistently tested.

(3) Passages or readers should be chosen with extreme care, taking grammatical structures *and* vocabulary into consideration. Passages with a story-line should be chosen first; they will be easier to understand and will, in consequence, build up the reader's confidence in his ability to handle "the rules of the game."

(4) Initial passages should not be lengthy, since, as we have seen, recollecting cues constitutes one of the main problems of the foreign reader; they should not be too short either, for the cues would be too few and there would be no challenge for the students.

(5) Students should not be made to read aloud passages they have not read before. Guided oral reading can be successfully done in the laboratory, in the form of exercises in word-grouping, intonation, stress, and oral fluency in general. (The fact that members of some cultures tend to find reading aloud rather embarrassing should be kept in mind here.)

(6) In the early stages, the actual reading should be done mostly outside of class, thus eliminating the urgency and stress of the classroom situation.

(7) Little by little, as the student becomes more skillful, speed in reading should be emphasized and special exercises given to that effect. This type of exercise can also be given in the laboratory.

(8) Not all students advance at the same speed. Individual cases should be contemplated as far as possible, and special exercises, more or less advanced, depending on the particular case, should be given to them.

(9) Always remember that reading is not an easy, smooth process and that what the teacher, usually a native speaker, finds trivial and uncomplicated, is often hard and complex for the foreign learner.

All these notions are not new and many teachers have been applying them for years with more or less success. Unfortunately, many others have not, and have made reading a boring and difficult task. It is our obligation to guide our students in the acquisition of the reading skill; we have to make them meet the pleasure and challenge of reading in a foreign language; and it is only by understanding the nature of the reading process and the problems involved that we will be able to acquire the flexibility and resourcefulness to achieve our goal.

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